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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a planned 4-year longitudinal study in Adelaide, South Australia, that seeks to trace the development of student teachers' constructs about becoming a teacher in three settings, namely, day care, preschool, and early primary school, in low-income and middle-to-high-income areas. Thus far, the study has focused on 20 student teachers in practicum courses over the course of 1 year. During this time the students provided their opinions on 19 constructs related to their role as teachers and caregivers in day care center environments. The results indicated that students felt, on average, more confident in caring for young children, more aware of health and hygiene issues, and more comfortable in their relationships with center staff after completing their practicums in the day care centers. The study also found that students placed in centers with a high percentage of children from low-income families seemed oblivious to the socioeconomic circumstances that made it necessary for such families to keep their children at the centers for long hours while the parents work. (Contains 28 references.) (MDM)

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LOVE, CARE AND POLITICS IN LOW INCOME EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS: THE PROCESS OF CONSTRUCTING A PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

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LOVE, CARE AND POLITICS IN LOW INCOME EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS: THE PROCESS OF CONSTRUCTING A PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

Susan Hill and Ann Veale

This four year longitudinal study conducted in Adelaide, South Australia, traces the development of student teachers' constructs about becoming a teacher in three settings— child care, (or day care), preschool and the early years of school. The study explores the development of student teachers' attitudes and expectations of young children from low income backgrounds where children may be disadvantaged by poverty.

The study was framed around these questions–

- What is the genesis and early development of early childhood preservice teachers' knowledge of teaching and learning?
- Are there patterns of constructs found between individual and groups of students in different early childhood settings?
- Are there differences between student teachers' constructions of a professional identify in disadvantaged and advantaged early childhood settings.

In the first year of the study we have mapped student teachers' constructs regarding work in child care centres both before and after the child care practicum.

The purpose of this paper is to raise and explore issues from the data collected.

Issues

Some issues emerging from this study include, student teachers' concerns about personal and professional dilemmas about what it means to work in day care. Next,a problem that arose for us, as course providers for preservice teachers, is the lack of, or invisibility of socio political awareness in the statements made by the preservice students. Related to the lack of socio political awareness is a concern to explore the kind of courses that may best prepare student teachers for early childhood education, particularly work in child care.

This paper is structured around the following issues arising from the data collected so far.

- What are the personal and professional dilemmas for student teachers who work in child care?

- Do 'low income' families use child care?

- Why does the issue of poverty appear to be invisible to student teachers?

- What pedagogy is required for developing courses that can make a difference to students' values, attitudes and expectations in early childhood education?

Background

This study explores the development of early childhood student teachers' constructs about what it means to become a teacher and caregiver of young children. Many educators have argued that teachers' actions and classroom decisions are largely driven by their perceptions and beliefs (Spodek 1987). Theorists have suggested that much of the pedagogy of early childhood education is consistent with middle class mothering which may be in conflict with working class mothering (Bernstein 1975, Tizard and Hughes 1984). Thus early childhood education may legitimise particular kinds of experiences like the middle class child's experiences while creating discontinuity and conflict for children from low income homes.

Katz and Chard (1989) suggest that the early years are fundamental for later development. If teachers' thought processes and actions are ideologically driven as suggested by Apple and King (1977) and Bernstein (1975) then it is important to map the development of the values and constructs in preservice teachers as they undertake practicum placement in child care, preschool and junior primary schools.

The construction of a professional identity in the area of early childhood education has traditionally been driven by the implementation of developmentally appropriate practice (Bredekamp 1989) and behaviourally or psychoanalytically guided psychology (Bloch 1992,). King (1977) suggests that early childhood teachers' child centred ideologies, (eg. developmentalism, individualism, play as learning and childhood innocence), are instrumental in teachers' construction of the learning environment.

These child centred ideologies are often framed around 'freedom to develop into rational adults' and 'play in a natural country garden' which, by the way, is usually romanticised as a country house 'of the aristocracy or the idealised rurality of natural life (swains and shepherdesses) and not the poverty-stricken farmland of peasants and farm workers' (Walkerdine, 1984). Many child centred ideologies may conceive children disadvantaged by poverty as less successful or using non appropriate behaviour in early childhood settings.

There is little research on how knowledge and thinking about teaching develops in early childhood settings, and few studies on how preservice teachers develop knowledge and constructs about teaching in early childhood centres and schools where children may be disadvantaged by poverty. In a review of research by Kane 1993, it was suggested that most studies of teacher thinking and ways teachers gain knowledge have involved experienced teachers rather

than preservice teachers, thus failing to provide insight into the genesis and early development of teachers' knowledge of teaching and learning.

We believe it is important to study preservice students' constructs about teaching young children disadvantaged by poverty as these children do not achieve as well as other groups in early literacy development (Crawford 1993). The early childhood years are critical because they lay the foundations for literacy and future school success Morrow (1992). Historically the years of early childhood have been looked to for solving problems associated with juvenile crime and social unrest (Walkerdine, 1984). The development of teachers' knowledge about teaching and learning in preservice teacher education programs has traditionally ignored what it means to teach in contexts where children are disadvantaged by poverty (Christie 1991).

The House of Assembly Select Committee Report on Primary and Secondary Education (1993) claimed that teachers are poorly prepared to cope with students with a wide range of learning needs and those disadvantaged by poverty or race. Recent surveys of early childhood teachers in disadvantaged schools revealed that teachers may hold deficit views regarding the achievements of young children (Badger, Comber and Weeks, 1992). Teachers were also found to have low expectations for children disadvantaged by poverty - (Hill 1992).

Student teachers traditionally prefer middle class practicum settings and actively avoid practicum placements in disadvantaged schools because they prefer to teach children just like themselves (Zeichner 1993). Paradoxically, student teachers are more likely to gain employment in low income schools because of their high staff turnover.

In this study, we are analysing the constructs of the students using the approach devised by Kelly. Kelly (1955) - defines a construct as a way in which things are construed as being alike or different from others. He suggests that a person's construct system is composed of a finite number of dichotomous constructs which allow an individual to predict, manage and control events to varying degrees. Each person actively constructs a representation of aspects of reality as a result of experiencing and interpreting events. These constructs precede actions and help determine what actions to take. This is a similar notion to that of Argyris and Schon (1975) who claim that "theories-in-use" occur when teachers act because of their thinking processes and belief structures.

Research methodology and research plan

Our research plan involves comparing the development of constructs as students participate in three different early childhood settings over four years. The twenty preservice, early childhood students were invited to participate in the study. Twenty students will provide data of statistical significance when analysed with a Repgrid, a computer program based on Kelly's construct theory. Kelly's personal construct

theory is clearly articulated in a model known as Kelly's Repertory Grid. According to Kelly, persons revise their constructs as they take into account feedback from their environment. These constructs can be mapped using the Repertory Grid.

As the study progresses over four years the twenty students will be placed in a range of low income and medium to high income early childhood settings. The low income or disadvantaged child care centres, preschools and junior primary schools often use criteria such as percentage of sole parents, percentage of unemployed care givers and family income levels to apply for additional government assistance.

Each student will be asked to participate twice during three practicums. The students will create Repertory Grids during the first week of the practicum and during the final week of the practicum. The Repertory Grid data will be amplified by tape recordings made by the students during the beginning and final weeks of the practicum. These tape recordings ask the students to expand on the grid's information and reflect on the progress of their experiences in their own words.

Data collection each year will be forty Repertory Grids, collected twice from twenty students and forty 30 minute tape recordings. In the following two years forty grids and forty tape recordings will be collected. Note that the practicum placements change each year. So in year one we will have child care data (children aged birth to five years), in year two kindergarten or preschool data (children aged three to five years) and in year three junior primary data (children aged three to five). There will be twelve sources of data for each preservice student.

The computer program based on Repgrid allows us to examine and contrast the similarities and differences between individual students and groups of students across child care settings. In conceptualising possible elements for the Repgrid we drew on work of Diamond (1991), Veale (1989), Saracho (1986) and Spodek (1990). The actual elements and constructs were generated by eighty students we worked with in a pre practicum lecture. New lists of constructs and elements will be generated in successive years.

The elements were:

(1) about acceptance by the children.
(2) about getting along with the staff.
(3) about my flexibility in handling chaos.
(4) about the long hours of work.
(5) about being exploited.
(6) about travel to and from work.
(7) that I may be too emotionally involved.
(8) that my life experience may be devalued.
(9) about finding what's wrong with babies and responding to them.

(10) about matching appropriate activities.
(11) about routines at the centre: eg nap time.
(12) about being able to manage children's behaviour.
(13) about health, hygiene and disease.
(14) about toilet routines.
(15) that when children throw a tantrum, I won't know what to do.
(16) that I do not understand children with disabilities.
(17) that I do not know how to comfort parents and babies.
(18) that I am concerned about understanding children who cannot talk.
(19) about keeping children safe.

The constructs were:

Basic Pole	*Opposite Pole*
(1) Challenged	Vulnerable
(2) Anxious	Exhilarated
(3) Useless	Helpful
(4) Able to cope	Unable to cope
(5) Feeling watched over	Independent
(6) Patient	Impatient
(7) Trusted	Not Trusted
(8) I'm doing it right	I'm floundering
(9)Unclear about expectations	Clear about expectations

Using the repgrid

The students contributed the 19 elements that form the basis of this analysis. They put forward the elements as aspects of the anticipated new experiences that were concerning them. We grouped the student list to form a set to be used in this research project. With the element written across the top of the screen, students then ranked 9 constructs with regard to each element. The constructs represent the range of feeling tone dimensions which students expected to feel. Between the two contrasting positions the student could identify the position which best expressed their personal standpoint, such as challenged..... vulnerable. The resulting choices were recorded as numbers 1 to 5 in a table. Students each recorded twice, before and after their placement. The difference between their first and their second time yields a numerical difference which indicated where students have shifted in their personal position. It is these shifts between before to after the placement that show the altering effects of the experience on their thinking. In many comparisons the numbers show little change so attention focus is on the areas where the experience changed the perspective.

Findings

There were four elements where students showed the most changes in their confidence as registered by construct 2. These were in order of magnitude:

Element 9: "about finding what's wrong with babies and responding to them",

Element 18: "that I am concerned about understanding children who cannot speak",
Element 13: "about health, hygiene and disease",
Element 2: "about getting along with the staff".

In all of these matters the students moved from the anxious category toward the exhilarated situation registering feelings of competence and success.

In the case of element 1: "about acceptance by the children", and element 5: "about being exploited", students perceived themselves as making changes in construct 5 which measures their progress in autonomy from feeling that they were being watched over towards independence. Together with the effect of element 6 where students moved ahead on construct 4 in their ability to cope with travel to and from work.

To sum up, by their own measures students had made significant changes in confidence with regard to issues which they had been concerned about before the practicum. These issues were identified as elements in which 8 out of 19 students themselves registered their improvement in confidence.

Analysis of the constructs individually supports the situation already identified. The biggest increase was for construct 2 with the highest ranking element 9: "about finding what's wrong with babies and responding to them".

•What are the personal and professional dilemmas for student teachers working in child care?

When we analysed the transcripts the issue of personal and professional dilemmas arose for most students. The students' comments are described here.

I want to teach. I do not want to baby sit.

I thought it would be more like changing their nappies, just feeding them and putting them to sleep.....they actually teach the children something... they subtly teach them things while they're playing.

In my kindergarten placement the staff only showed affection to the children when they were hurt or missing their parents (whereas) in the child care centre they just went up and hugged the children whenever they wanted to and the children did exactly the same thing. It was more like a parent/child relationship rather than a student teacher relationship, which I was a lot more comfortable with.

I think one of their key needs is attention. If you talk to them respectfully ...not just blasting them for something they've done...It's like you might call ***love*** *or* ***care...you actually show a deep interest*** *..which means you don't get angry unnecessarily*

Political tensions between trained and untrained child care workers

The people were nice but I felt out of place there...like they didn't want me there. I was looked down upon because I was gaining more qualifications than they were.

The detailed child study required in the practicum subject may take attention from the social context and place the focus on developmental psychology and child centred pedagogy.

The written work was consuming!

I never thought that a kindergarten teacher or a child care worker would have this much written work to do. I just thought you would teach the children and you wouldn't keep many records. There's so much writing that has to be done.

- **Do 'low income' families use child care.**

This study set out to explore student teacher's constructs as they engage in the practicum in low income and middle class income settings. Finding information on which centres serve low income populations was extremely difficult.

We spoke to four government administrators in child care to find out which centres have a high proportion of children living in low income homes. In the end we had to phone individual centres to find out this information. The reasons for the difficulty of getting this information has to do with the fact that parents of young children in child care often travel to a centre near a work site. The data on income levels of the community surrounding the child care centre may have little to do with the parents' income levels. Interestingly, government schools and preschools talk openly about unemployment levels and income levels but in the child care area one administrator suggested that child care centres do not want to be labelled as serving low income communities. This may serve to cover and make invisible the struggles of some low income families facing the stress of working, sometimes in two jobs, and still not having enough money.

Briggs (1994), states that 'A staggering 500,000 (or one in eight) Australian children were estimated to be living in poverty in 1990', and Australia and also the United States had the highest poverty rate when measured against other comparable OECD countries (Brotherhood of St Laurence 1991a).

Poverty is a relative term. Briggs states that 'inequality occurs when family incomes are so low that parents lack access to resources which determine children's life chances.' This may include access to 'housing lighting health care education nutrition, transport recreation and socialisation'. According to the Brotherhood of St Laurence, families dependent on the single parent's pension have an income well below the Henderson Poverty Line. About 58% of solo

mothers with dependent children are registered as unemployed. Solo mothers who do work may use child care or a range of other family child care services.

To calculate the number of children living in poverty attending child care centres we used the Adelaide Social Atlas (1993) which lists low income earners as people over 15 years with an income of $12,000 or less. The proportion of sole parents coincides with areas where low income earners are located. High percentages of one parent families generally coincided with those areas where housing trust accommodation is available.

We compared the official data on percentage of low income households and low income earners with the percentage of parents who receive fee relief. The following table illustrates the discrepency between official figures and individual centre figures.

Name of centre	low income %	low inc. h/hold	% fee relief
A	38%	28%-	32%
B	38%	28%-	86.8%*
C	51-58%	51-62%	40%*
D	38-45%	28-40%	50%*
E	58%	51-62%	59.5%*
F	58%	62%	59.6%*
G	38-45%	28-40%	32%
H	38-45%	28-40%	31.7%
I	38%	38%	51-62%*
J	38-45%	38-45%	64%*
K	54-51%	28-40%	30%
L	38-45%	28-40%	***
M	58%	62%	50%*
N	51-58%	51%	50%*
O	38-45%	40%	22.3%

Table I. Percentage of low income earners, low income households and parents receiving fee relief.

Low income = People over fifteen years with an income of $12.000 or less from 1991 census.
Low income households have income of $25,000 or less..

Please note that the percentage of fee relief is calculated by the figure for operating costs and the percentage of this operating cost that comes to the centre in the form of government assisted fee relief.
*** Fully government funded

To summarise, there are high percentages of low income families using child care and these figures are most accurate if the percentage of parents receiving fee relief are used rather than data on low income households. This is because parents often take their children to centres near their workplace.

- **The issue of poverty appears to be invisible to student teachers.**

Many of our students were placed in child care centres with a high percentage of families with fee relief. The development of students' professional identity reveals concerns to do with physical development and management of very young children. Concerns did not touch on socio political issues. No students in the tape recorded responses commented on parents' lack of choice about work, the long hours and possible shift work that may be associated with low income earners. One student at a centre made up of 86% fee relief said:

> *I found it really difficult to see children coming in five days a week from 8 in the morning or 6 in the morning, even until 6 at night.*
>
> *We became their parents.....that's where it sort of changed from baby sitting to teaching because if you're with a child everyday of the week for ten or twelve hours then the child is having more contact with you than he is with his own parents. You are really raising that child and that's a hard factor to get a grip on.*
>
> *I know that child care isn't baby sitting but my head doesn't want to believe it or my heart doesn't want to believe it. I still see child care as baby sitting but I understand it's like raising children because you do raise them.*

Another student working in a centre with a high percentage of fee relief commented:

> *Maybe parents, mothers and fathers have to work but it would be much more effective if children were brought up at home. Some people are so busy getting a family life that they haven't got time to be at home to take care of the children. Some kids spend whole days there from morning to 6 or 6.30 at night five days a week.*
>
> *If you really care for your kids you should be able to put some time in at that age. You develop this strong character, a real sense of family values at home. A strong character is someone who knows themselves and can deal with the world...and once you've lost that even if you've got the money it's gone.*

Another commented:

> *I went in with a bias, not against child care, but I felt really uncomfortable about it. I worked it through and talked to the Director. I came out feeling that we need to provide a home, a nurturing home a loving environment for the children. That's where they are and what other people think about it is*

irrelevant. They need to be loved and supported and nurtured through the process.

The comments often reveal an idealised view of childhood. Implicit in this is a view that care givers have enough money to spend time at home with children to develop children's character, values and attitudes.

A mature male student commented:

Some people are such horrible parents that it's better for the child to be in a rotten child care centre than to be home with their parents all the time.

But I don't think that any child care centre or kindergarten can be anywhere near as good as that of the parent child relationship, if the parents enjoy the child....but I think child care centres are a totally necessary facet of society.

There was no mention of any direct experience with parents on the tapes.

- **What pedagogy is required for developing courses that can make a difference to students' unexamined values, attitudes and expectations in early childhood education?**

Does a traditional focus on child study draw students attention away from the broader socio political issues to do with poverty, families and young children? Should we deal with socio political issues in beginning subjects in our preservice teaching awards? If early childhood presents a foundation for future learning it seems important that children from low income families are not disadvantaged through child care.

Summary

It is possible that students in the practicum are so concerned with procedural and technical skills that they may not respond to the context - (Bennett 1993). It may be that the practicum serves to encourage this focus on procedural and technical skills if socio contextual issues are not addressed.

We found that students' constructs did shift between the beginning and conclusion of the practicum. The major shift was in understanding babies and responding to them and understanding children who cannot talk.

Students who did discuss broader socio political issues did so within a traditional, stereotypical framework of 'family', pointing out that children in child care may be further disadvantaged because their parents are not with them at home.

There is obviously a lot of work to be done to explore socio political issues with our students.

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Ethical considerations

The students are not identified by name and the researchers will not be involved in the practicum supervision of the students. The research data will be confidential and not used for assessment purposes for the University Practicum assessment.